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Reagan Hints Veto of Any Bill Ending Nicaraguan Rebel Aid

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President Reagan has sent some early warnings that he might veto any legislation terminating his program of aid to rebels against the government of Nicaragua, even at the cost of losing further military aid to El Salvador and \$1.1 billion in other projects in the same bill.

As President-elect Jose Napoleon Duarte of El Salvador ended a four-day triumphal tour of Washington and left for home yesterday with further aid to his country seemingly secure, administration officials turned to the defense of the three-year-old "contra" program in Nicaragua, which House critics have vowed to kill.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz, Gen. John W. Vessey Jr., the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and CIA Director William J. Casey held meetings on both sides of Capitol Hill to argue strongly against any shutdown provisions.

"If it contains termination language, that could kill the whole bill, including [military aid to] El Salvador," said a Senate Republican leadership aide after talking to the White House. "It puts the whole bill in jeopardy."

Other sources said the White House was still hoping to work out a compromise and was not yet calling around to make active veto threats. The hint of such an effort, however, did not immediately convert the critics.

"I'm not surprised, but I don't think it'll make anybody cringe in the corner," said Rep. Wyche Fowler Jr. (D-Ga.), a member of the House Intelligence Committee that will take the lead in opposing the contra program when it comes to the House floor.

Duarte's visit was widely praised in Congress as assuring passage in the House for Reagan's proposed \$62 million in emergency military aid to El Salvador, which has already passed the Senate, and easing the way for larger economic aid proposals after that.

At a news conference before leaving, Duarte pledged to control "rightist death squads and abuses of authority" and to end "the culture of terror" in his country, in part by changes in the military high command. "If I cannot, I don't deserve to be president," he said.

These promises won a warm response from Congress, but that warmth did not seem to extend to the administration's request for \$21 million for the contras.

Instead, House members were debating whether to call for a total cutoff or to propose shutdown funding. They were discussing levels of about \$2 million to fund a military withdrawal and about \$4 million for resettlement of the contras and their families, according to House Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill Jr. (D-Mass.).

Majority Leader James C. Wright Jr. (D-Tex.) said he had told Shultz, Vessey and Casey that "they've got to confront the issue" of House determination to end the program. "It would be a good idea to drop it," he said.

Shultz, Vessey and Casey argued in their presentation that U.S. vital interests are at stake in Central America, that U.S. policy there is achieving its objectives and that Nicaragua is testing U.S. resolve with its continued military buildup, according to several members who were present.

Rep. Bill Alexander (D-Ark.), the chief deputy majority whip, quoted Casey as saying, "The contras are convinced they will win because God and America are on their side."

"I thought it was pitiful," said Rep. David R. Obey (D-Wis.). "It was the typical slide and pony show I've gotten from the Pentagon for 15 years."

Fowler said the arguments are wrong.

"By any objective evaluation there's no evidence of success," he said. "They can continue to say it but they're now whistling past the graveyard."